

Teacher-Pupil Ethnicity Match and Achievement

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In many countries, ethnic minority teachers are strongly underrepresented. It is often assumed that if there were more minority teachers, minority pupils would achieve much better. This assumption has rarely been empirically tested. In search of proof, the present study reviews the literature. 24 relevant studies were found, all pertaining to the US. The findings show that there is little empirical evidence that a stronger degree of ethnic match, be it in the form of a one-to-one coupling of teachers to pupils with the same ethnic background, or a larger share of minority teachers at an ethnically mixed school, leads to predominantly positive results. Insofar positive effects were found, they apply to a greater extent to subjective teacher evaluations than to objective achievement outcome measures.

teacher ethnicity

pupil ethnicity

achievement

ethnic match

racial symmetry

racial congruence

1. The ethnic teacher-pupil mismatch

In many countries ethnic minority and immigrant pupils often achieve much lower in education than their majority or native-born peers. Reasons for this discrepancy often mentioned in the literature are: differences in the socioeconomic position of the pupils' parents; lack of educational "capital" and resources at home; little cognitive stimulation in the home situation; and cultural-religious differences regarding the role of education and school. Another explanation does not focus on the home situation, but points to the fact that there are hardly any ethnic minority teachers and that most ethnic minority pupils are in classes (even when they are the majority there) with "white", native-born, middle-class teachers.

To give an example, in the Netherlands in 2009 (more recent data are not available) 4% of the primary and 5% of the secondary education staff had a non-Western background. Many of them were not teachers, however, but had a supportive function. In the same year, 11% of the pupils in primary education belonged to an ethnic minority, while this was 15% of the pupils in secondary education. The percentage of minority teachers thus deviates strongly from the percentage of minority pupils and minority teachers are therefore strongly underrepresented in Dutch education.

In the literature, various terms are used to describe a more balanced situation. It is assumed that with more minority teachers there will be more "racial symmetry", "ethnic congruence", "ethnic match", "racial consonance" or "racial similarity", and that as a result minority pupil achievement will increase. Several reasons are mentioned for

this assumed positive influence of a good representation of minority teachers: the minority teacher functions as a role model; minority teachers improve contacts between the school and minority parents; minority parents and pupils recognize themselves better in school and as a result develop more affinity with education which leads to more parental participation; minority teachers are more familiar with the minority culture and have an important monitoring function; minority teachers function as a source of information for their majority colleagues; and they contribute to better preparing students for living in a multicultural society.

2. Research question and design

While in several countries initiatives have been undertaken to attract more minority teachers, it is remarkable that the arguments presented as to why more minority teachers are necessary have hardly been validated by empirical research. The present study (Driessen, 2015) therefore aims to systematically review the empirical evidence and answer the question of the effect of teacher ethnicity on pupil achievement, or more precisely: do ethnic minority pupils achieve better academically with ethnic minority teachers than with majority teachers?

To answer this question, an international literature review was conducted. Several web-based search engines were engaged and international experts were consulted. In the search for relevant studies, the following selection criteria were employed: a focus on the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States; not older than twenty years; primary and secondary education; quantitative methodology; large sample sizes, a (quasi-)experimental design with control variables; teacher ethnicity and/or pupil ethnicity as the central explanatory variables; cognitive and noncognitive effects on pupils as the outcome variables. On the basis of these criteria 24 relevant publications could ultimately be identified. Without exception, all studies pertained to the United States, and most of them focused on the primary sector.

Research into effects of teacher ethnicity on pupils' achievement is a complex endeavor and various methodological reservations are warranted. Important questions are: How long will such effects continue to influence pupil outcomes? Is there only an effect during the time the teacher and pupil are together in the same class, or also in later grades/classes? How long does it take before an effect of a specific teacher will manifest? And is it possible to discern or control the effects of other and earlier teachers?

Regarding outcome measures, a difference was made between (subjective) teacher evaluations (often of pupil behavior) and (objective) academic test scores. Evaluations to a large extent pertain to here and now experiences and are influenced by specific personal teacher-pupil relations, while academic test achievement is the result of a process, that is, of experiences with several teachers in earlier grades. Therefore, cognitive effects will probably continue to occur for longer periods of time, while noncognitive effects will tend to be limited to a specific teacher in a specific class.

3. Results

In the following table, the results of the 24 studies are summarized, while distinguishing between objective and subjective effect measures, and between individual level effects, that is, matching a teacher with a pupil, and compositional effects, that is effects at the class, school, and district level. The table shows negative effects (–), no effects (0), positive effects (+), and strongly differentiated effects (≈), that is, effects that strongly vary by group and/or effect measure. Below the table, a so-called 'vote count' is presented, a way to quantify the results of a series of studies by simply adding the number of effects up.

Study	Sector	Objective effect	Subjective effect
Bates & Glick (2013)	pe		+
Brown-Jeffy (2009)	se	–	
Clotfelter et al. (2005)	pe	0	
Cullinan & Kauffman (2005)	pe, se		0
Dee (2004)	pe	+	
Dee (2005)	se		+
Downey & Pribesh (2004)	pe, se		+
Easton-Brooks et al. (2009)	pe	0	
Eddy & Easton-Brooks (2011)	pe	0	
Ehrenberg et al. (1995)	se	0	+
Fryer & Levitt (2004)	pe	–	0

Howsen & Trawick (2007)	pe	0	
Jackson et al. (2006)	pe		+
Klopfenstein (2005)	se		+
McGrady & Reynolds (2013)	se		≈
Meier (1993)	pe, se	t +; m -	t +; m -
Meier et al. (1999)	pe, se	+	
Oates (2003)	se	+	+
Ouazad (2007)	pe	0	+
Pigott & Cowen (2000)	pe		0
Pitts (2007)	pe, se	t +; m 0	
Saft & Pianta (2001)	ps, pe		+
Shepherd (2011)	pe		-
Takei & Shouse (2008)	se		≈
Total		3-7 0/5+	2-3 0/10+/2≈

Sector: ps = preschool; pe = primary education; se = secondary education. Level: t = teachers; m = management. Effect: + = positive; 0 = zero; - = negative; ≈ = strongly differentiated.

Of the 15 studies that analyzed objective effect measures, 20% showed a negative effect, 47% no effect, and 33% a positive effect; the no effect results thus dominated. And of the 17 studies that examined subjective effect measures, 12% revealed a negative effect, 18% no effect, 59% a positive effect, and 12% a strongly differentiated effect; here the positive effects dominated. Taking all 24 studies together, it was found that in 47% of the studies there is a positive effect, and in 53% of the studies there is an ambiguous effect, no effect, or a negative effect. There appear to be no differences between primary and secondary education.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that there is little empirical evidence that a stronger degree of ethnic match, be it in the form of a one-to-one coupling of teachers to pupils with the same ethnic background, or a larger share of minority teachers at an ethnically mixed school, leads to predominantly positive results. Insofar positive effects were found, they apply to a greater extent to subjective teacher evaluations than to objective achievement outcome measures.

That more positive effects were found for subjective measures is not surprising. This can be explained from a positive bias of the teachers toward pupils from their own ethnic group, and possibly from a negative bias against those of another group. After all, the teachers have a direct influence on these evaluations. Regarding test achievement, the actual abilities of the pupils will be decisive. To what extent this reasoning is correct and to what extent the subjective evaluations affect the objective outcome measures, or the other way round, cannot be said on the basis of the present study. Much more research in this area is therefore needed. In addition, it should be kept in mind that all studies evaluated here relate to the US, and that it is unclear what the precise value of these findings is for other countries.

Note

This item is based on: Geert Driessen (2015). Teacher ethnicity, student ethnicity, and student outcomes. A review of the empirical literature. *Intercultural Education*, 26(3), 179-191.

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